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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000392

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: KALINAK ON GASPAROVIC: DOTH SMER PROTEST TOO MUCH?

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Weiser for reason 1.4b.

1. (C) Summary: SMER leader Robert Kalinak says SMER's decision to endorse Gasparovic as a "way to support Kukan without supporting Kukan" was a nonsensical strategy which then backfired. Smer remains committed nevertheless to Gasparovic in the second round. Having a grateful Gasparovic in the presidential palace would help Robert Fico's prime ministerial ambitions after the next parliamentary elections -- a more credible explanation for Smer's endorsement. Ironically, this makes Meciar the (unofficial and unacknowledged) government candidate. End Summary.

Presidential Elections: Smer,s Miscalculation

2. (SBU) Smer MP Robert Kalinak told polecoffs that he was deeply concerned about Vladimir Meciar,s victory in the first round and his likely success in the run-off. He said that Smer made a mistake and miscalculated before the first round in deciding to back Ivan Gasparovic, assuming that the second round would nevertheless be between Meciar and Kukan. Smer party officials had no doubts about Kukan,s victory in the second round. In evaluating the chances of the candidates, Smer estimated that about 25 percent of Smer voters would support Schuster, but that those who disliked him numbered around 60 percent. About 20 percent of Smer voters would support Meciar, but his "negatives" were about 40 percent. Smer finally chose Gasparovic because he had about 25 percent support with low "negatives." (SMER vice chairman Paska told DCM separately that Smer executive committee was overwhelmingly in favor of Gasparovic.)

Why Meciar is Dangerous and Gasparovic is Benign

3. (SBU) Kalinak described the differences between Meciar and Gasparovic and the problems that would arise if Meciar becomes president. Meciar will have 26 MPs to support his policies, unlike Gasparovic, who has no party backing in Parliament and therefore is not dangerous. Kalinak further speculated that Meciar may block appointments of some ministers in the future and after the elections he could exert control not only in parliament (through his MPs), but also in the ministries by appointing his own people. After the next parliamentary elections, Kalinak said that he could envision a scenario in which Meciar would be president and the prime minister and speaker of parliament would also come from HZDS. In Kalinak,s opinion, Meciar is a stronger advocate of EU policies than of transatlantic ties and thus he will try to be acceptable to the French and Germans and ally Slovakia with them.

Let,s Make a Deal

4. (SBU) Kalinak claims that PM Mikulas Dzurinda made a tacit agreement with Meciar, such that if SDKU and ANO voters do not vote in the run-off, Meciar and HZDS will not oppose GOS initiatives. (Comment: Low voter turnout is expected to assist Meciar's chances.) He contrasted SDKU,s behavior before the parliamentary elections in 2002 "when SDKU was vocally opposed to Meciar" and now when they appear to be silent about his candidacy. In Kalinak,s opinion, Meciar would sell his party to the highest bidder as long as he is president. Kalinak also said that Meciar approached Smer for its support prior to the first round.

Future Coalition Possibilities

5. (SBU) Kalinak stressed that Smer and he personally tried to keep distance from HZDS and Meciar, but in the future this may appear more difficult, should Smer and HZDS together gain the majority in the next parliamentary election. If Smer refuses to cooperate with HZDS, Smer,s voters would not understand why they do not want to make a coalition with HZDS. In his view, Meciar could enter a coalition with any available party, including SNS or communists, whose preferences may grow due to the hardship caused by economic reforms.

Why Gasparovic is the Lesser Evil

16. (SBU) In Kalinak's view, Gasparovic was always just number two in HZDS, and was just following Meciar,s orders. Gasparovic is more pro-Western and supports transatlantic policies. Gasparovic has assured Smer leadership that he will no longer seek support from the nationalists, but used the opportunity last fall/winter to establish name recognition. Kalinak does not think that Gasparovic will try to manipulate the Parliament as Meciar might. Kalinak said that he will participate in several TV discussions and will try to appeal to voters to go and vote, warning them that

ignoring the second round will only work to Meciar,s benefit.

Comment

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17. (C) Others in Smer have told us in the last week that the decision to support Gasparovic was contentious within the party, and pushed the "acceptable limits." Nonetheless, Smer made the strategic decision to endorse this candidate, and is sticking by him. Ironically, Meciar is now seen as the government candidate. He is considered the "lesser of two evils" by coalition politicians who fear a Gasparovic victory would do nothing but give more impetus to Smer. Jewish community leaders worried in an April 14 meeting with Ambassador and Congressman Wexler about anti-Semitic tendencies of the nationalists that supported Gasparovic, and seemed to prefer a Meciar victory.

18. (C) Kalinak's comments about Smer seeking to indirectly support Kukan ring hollow. Several Smer leaders including Kalinak told us for months that they would not endorse any presidential candidate in the first round. There was no need for them to do so, and they can have had no doubt that their endorsement would swing at least a few percentage points to Gasparovic. A likelier interpretation is that Fico made a calculated decision that a grateful Gasparovic in the presidential palace would facilitate his chances to be the next prime minister, which would not have been the case with a second-round endorsement of Kukan. Kalinak's attempt at rationalization is another reminder that Smer remains mindful of Washington's interest. It is not the first time Smer leaders have attempted to "spin" their actions after the fact, usually only when they realize we've been paying attention.

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